



Sympathy for the Devil. Adorable Antiheroes in Contemporary TV Series

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Workshop “Identity and Emotions in Contemporary TV Series”

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Breaking Bad, episode 5.8. (AMC, 2008-13)



Emotions and TV fiction

- Emotional determinism

“Films are designed to produce a particular effect and as an artifact, they display a functional design and develop a certain consistency. This orderly structure and consistency are both reflected in the systematic affective reaction of the viewer, a reaction that they themselves are not aware of” (Ed Tan)



Emotions and TV fiction

- Emotional determinism
- Postmodernism and antiheroism

Generally antiheroes are “criminal but redeemable (...). Despite clearly doing improper things for (at times) corrupt reasons, antiheroes still function as ‘forces of good’ in many narratives” (Shaffer and Raney).



Emotions and TV fiction

- Emotional determinism
- Postmodernism and antiheroism
- *The Sopranos* and the virtuous circle

This elevation of the antihero as a paradigm of better quality television combines ideological and industrial elements in order to generate a thematic constant that can be very effectively developed in a serial narrative.



Levels of engagement

- **Alignment**

“Concerns the way a film gives us access to the actions, thoughts, and feeling of characters” (Murray Smith)



Levels of engagement

- Alignment
- Allegiance

“Concerns the way a film attempts to marshal our sympathies for or against the various characters in the world of fiction”



Moral Judgment and emotions

- **Perverse allegiance**

The moral judgment we form in response to audiovisual fiction is largely influenced by emotional responses, and therefore, it is easily manipulated.



Moral Judgment and emotions

- Perverse allegiance
- The emotional power of the moving image
 - Music, close-ups, voice over...



Strategies to reinforce identification

1. Character victimization

“We sympathize with characters when we believe that they are in danger and must be protected, when they are suffering or bereaved, or when we believe that someone has been treated unfairly” (Carl Plantinga)



The Sopranos (HBO, 1999-2007)



Dexter (Showtime, 2006-13)



24 (Fox, 2001-10)

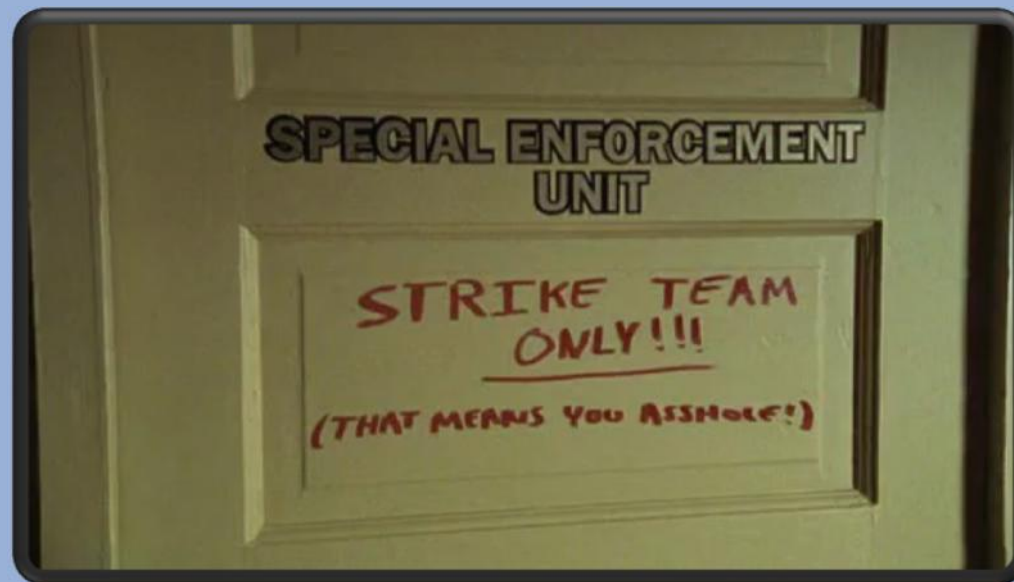


Strategies to reinforce identification

1. Character victimization

2. The lesser evil

The protagonist needs an antagonist (...) there is always someone much worse than they are, such that we unconsciously compare them with other characters and we reach the conclusion that our protagonists, despite their violent methods and their crimes, are “the good guys”.



The Shield, episode 1.1. (FX, 2002-08)



Strategies to reinforce identification

1. Character victimization
2. The lesser evil
3. Family and the wounds of time
 - An alibi
 - A different light
 - “Re-allegiance”



Homeland, episode 1.12. (Showtime, 2011-)



Conclusion

- Serial narrative and didactic function
 - “The existence of evil helps maintain our vitality as moral creatures” (Rothman)



Conclusion

- Serial narrative and didactic function
- Because of / in spite of?

“Do we feel an allegiance with—a sympathy for—a character *because of* the perverse act that they engage in or *in spite of* that act?” (Murray Smith)



***Breaking Bad* (AMC, 2008-13)**



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